



Number 38

Как слышать без проповедующего?

How Shall They Hear ...?

Siberia Letter of Rev. Alan Ludwig

Blog: www.lutheranprof.org

E-mail: alan.ludwig@lcmsintl.org

Website: www.siberiamissionary.org

<http://lcms.org/international>

Terrorism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Missions

If you follow American news at all, you have probably heard of two new laws that have been enacted in Russia. The first, approved toward the end of 2016, is an anti-terrorism law. It contains a section prohibiting extremism, including missionary activity. The second new law, founded upon this one, is the recent ban of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. In the Western press the cry is "Repression!" "A return to Stalinism!" or the like.

As usual, the media show no understanding of Russian history and the Russian culture and mindset, nor do they care to. Nor do they grasp the nuances of the new laws. What is it they are missing?

No Absolute Religious Freedom Ever

In the more than 1000-year history of Christian Russia, no religion has been completely free except for Russian Orthodoxy, the official state religion. Lutherans appeared in Russia already at the time of the Reformation. For 500 years Lutherans have practiced their faith in this country. They enjoyed the favor, protection, and even financial support of some of the czars, including Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Cath-

arine the Great. Peter the Great even attended Lutheran services, and it is said that Ivan the Terrible liked to discuss theology with Lutheran pastors. Even so, Lutherans were limited in their freedoms. Proselytizing others, especially Orthodox, was punishable by death. Children of mixed marriages couldn't be baptized as Lutherans, only into the Orthodox faith. Until the 19th century, the liturgy and prayers had to be in the ethnic languages, whether German, Finnish, Swedish, Estonian, or Latvian. The government regulated the worship and governance of the Lutheran and other churches. Only for a few years before the revolution of 1917 were some of these laws lifted. After the revolution, of course, there was no religious freedom at all.

By contrast, today Lutherans and other religious confessions working in Russia have a great deal of freedom. The single government requirement is that a church be properly registered. The government doesn't dictate to registered churches what they

must preach or to whom they may preach it. The new anti-terrorism law doesn't apply to us, because we're a registered church and seminary. The only ones affected by the "anti-mission clause" are those missionaries and groups who try to work and worship in Russia without registration. This is something the American press has largely overlooked.



The Curious Case of the Witnesses

The Jehovah's Witness ban is still working its way through the appeals courts, but it looks rather hopeless. The main objection to Jehovah's witnesses is their stand on blood transfusions. The fire was sparked by the case of a little girl whose parents denied her a life-saving transfusion on religious grounds. Secondly, the extreme aggressiveness of this cult in one-to-one evangelism is contrary to the whole Russian ethos. Despite laws against going door-to-door, the Witnesses continued to do so.



What does this ban hold for other religious confessions in Russia? It's too soon to say. But probably it poses no threat. As far as I can tell, the outlawing of Jehovah's Witnesses isn't based at all on their message. It's based rather on their extreme tactics, which are not only offensive, but also (in the case of no blood transfusion) life-endangering. While this isn't the American way of doing things, neither does it spell the end of the world for the Lutheran Church in Russia.

The Practical Consequence for Missions

What does all this mean for my work? It means that it continues as it always has. No one has told me what I can or cannot teach, or to whom I may speak. Our church, being registered, has every right to preach the Word of God without censorship or limitation. Our clergy continue to preach Christ and Him crucified. They continue to present Him as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I go on equipping men to carry on the work of the ministry after me. For the right to do all this without government interference we thank our merciful God.

Please Pray

- ✚ for our seminarians, for zeal in their studies, for wisdom, and for boldness;
- ✚ for Zhanna, an Orthodox acquaintance, for healing;
- ✚ For my safe travels to and from the conferences;
- ✚ for the bishop, pastors, and deacons of the SELC.

Lord, have mercy.



A Heads-up for You at Home

While the American news media are crying foul in Russia, they're ignoring the very real dangers to religious freedom in America. Already in some places there have been reports of local and state governments trying to regulate sermons. Some want to force pastors to be silent even in their own churches on certain social issues that the church has always had the right to address. Merely saying what the Bible says about these things would be labeled hate speech. For now the attempt to regulate religious speech in America may be delayed, but it isn't derailed. Vigilance is needed on the home front more than ever.

Meanwhile, let us work and pray together in bringing the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ to as many as possible, both at home and abroad. Salvation is in Him alone. His death and resurrection are the only hope for a lost world.

Three Conferences

In May I am privileged to speak at three conferences. The first was our local conference here in Novosibirsk, on May 13. This

conference commemorated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and also the tenth anniversary of the consecration of the bishop of the SELC, Vsevolod Lytkin. The topic of my paper was "Christian Hope in the Bible." I demonstrated from Scripture how Christian hope is not uncertain, like our usual understanding of worldly hope. Rather, it is sure and certain.



The second and third conferences will take place in Prague, Czech Republic, and Riga, Latvia. These conferences are also devoted to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. I will be speaking on the topic "Presenting the Gospel in an Unfriendly Environment." A number of seminary professors and pastors from the U.S. will also be presenting at these.

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